paper flesh and charcoal blood

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paper flesh and charcoal blood

by TheSilverQueen

Summary

Will isn’t really sure why he buys the bookshop, in the end. He could have bought anything with the rather hefty please-keep-your-mouth-shut settlement from the FBI – turns out that the only thing more embarrassing than locking up the wrong person is wrongly locking up one of your own people – but he’d been browsing the ads looking for a place to stay, a place not tainted by bad memories and nosy reporters and former colleagues, and he’d seen an ad for a bookshop. He'd thought that there was nothing special about it, except that it was the change he needed after weeks he spent in the bowels of the BSHCI.

That is, until it turns out that the bookshop is special, because it is haunted by one Hannibal Lecter.

Notes

Happy Valentine's Day, my fellow Fannibals! This is officially my 69th fic on AO3!!! I asked y'all what you wanted from the various fic tropes for shops and for some reason bookshop won the Twitter poll. (Honestly was not expecting that). But as promised: here is my magical bookshop AU.

Warnings for brief Alana/Will interaction, because I decided late last night that what this story really needed was a Fromage twist.

See the end of the work for more notes

Will isn't really sure why he buys the bookshop, in the end. He could have bought anything with the rather hefty please-keep-your-mouth-shut settlement from the FBI – turns out that the only thing more embarrassing than locking up the wrong person is wrongly locking up one of your own people – but he'd been browsing the ads looking for a place to stay, a place not tainted by bad memories and nosy reporters and former colleagues, and he'd seen an ad for a bookshop. Nothing special about it, except that it had a comfortable apartment above, a nice yard in the back, and a sizeable basement for storage. It's very different from Will's house, his lighthouse in the sea, alone and apart from society; but then again, he had a lot of time to think during the weeks he spent in the bowels of the BSHCI, a lot of hours spent contemplating a change.

Also, this bookshop has neighboring stores, which means security cameras and witnesses. Alibis. Will is well aware that while not everyone believed he was guilty, far less are now convinced that he is completely innocent.

Will picks up the phone and makes a call.

The deal is completed rather easily. The realtor is either from out of town or uninterested in serial killer gossip, because she doesn't make any comments about who Will is or why he's able to make such a large purchase in cash. She does, however, give him the keys and a tour.

"It's a little messy," she apologizes, as they climb into the dusty building. "The previous owner was, shall we say, a little bit of a – "

"A hoarder?" Will says, nodding at the stacks of books on the floor, the shelves stuffed to the gills, and even more boxes lining the walls.

"If you like."

The store is reasonably sized, if a bit cramped from all the books. At the back is an office, which somehow has even *more* books on the floor, and next to that is a bathroom, an employees only one to match with the public access one in the front of the store. Next to the bathroom is a small register area for ringing up purchases, a dirty display case that looks like it hasn't seen anything but dust in a decade, and some sad, worn out chairs.

"Did the previous owner ever actually employ anyone?" Will asks, poking at one chair with his foot. It creaks sadly, but it does indeed roll a few inches when he prods it, so it's not a completely lost cause.

"Some seasonal employees, from what I understand. Usually the foot traffic only picked up during college time."

The realtor then wrestles open a door which is next to the office. Will had assumed it was a supply closet, but instead it opens up to a set of rickety stairs. They climb up, dodging the various piles of books on the steps, and end up on a landing where there is another door, and this one has about six locks on it.

Will raises an eyebrow. “Was he worried about being robbed or something?”

The realtor shrugs, methodically inserting one key after another. “Maybe he just liked his privacy, Mr. Graham. Dealing with customers day after day probably means he wanted his own personal space.”

And, well. Will can’t argue with that.

He can’t argue with the apartment that lays beyond the door either. Unlike the store downstairs, it’s relatively clean and has all the necessary amenities: bedroom, closet, kitchen, laundry room, living room, dining room, full bathroom, and a spare room that the realtor says was full of books but Will can easily picture turning into a nice working room. The living room overlooks the street outside, unfortunately, but the curtains are heavy duty and Will can always buy blackout ones. The dining room and the bedroom have windows into the backyard, which is not enough for seven dogs but can, perhaps, fit one or two.

Fortunately, the FBI confiscated and adopted out most of Will’s pack. The only one he still has is Winston, because soft-hearted Alana had saved him.

The realtor lays out the final details on procuring Internet and cable, the local grocery store and gas station, and summarizes the neighborhood for him. Will only half pays attention, because mostly he keeps thinking about how different this apartment is from his house. Usually such a small space would make him long for freedom and the open stream, but right now . . . right now he feels comfortable. Not quite at home, but once he has Winston and his belongings, maybe that could change.

“So, Mr. Graham,” the realtor says, a polite smile on her face, “what do you think?”

Will breathes in the scent – old dust, paper books, ink blotters – and smiles back. “I’ll take it.”

The first thing Will does is buy all new things. He’s not one for waste, but after so many agents trampled all through his house and tore apart everything he owned looking for evidence that didn’t exist, he’s too tired to try and put it all back together. Besides, even after purchasing the bookshop, Will’s got more than enough money to buy new belongings, so he does.

The second thing Will does is go get Winston. Winston is beyond ecstatic to see him, pulling at his leash so hard that he drags Alana the final steps to the door until she gives up and releases him, and Will spends a good five minutes just hugging and petting him, basking in the pure, uncomplicated love Winston showers on him. It’s awkward, seeing Alana – she’d believed in him, but still urged him to go to therapy and it burns – but Will manages to restrain himself to mumbled small talk and, wonder of wonders, escapes without telling her that he’s selling his house and moving. He does take the card for the psychiatrist she recommends so as to not hurt her feelings, but it gets dumped out of the car window the second he drives away. He saw more than enough shrinks in the BSCHI.

The third thing Will does is buy enough cleaning supplies to sanitize a mansion, because he refuses to live in a dust pile. He sets Winston free in the backyard to investigate and mark his territory, and then he spends the next few hours dusting and sweeping and scrubbing. It'll take several sessions to make it really clean again, he knows, but it gives him a sense of accomplishment to sit back on his heels, massaging his aching hands and looking at how the floor gleams again.

He orders a pizza for dinner and eats it right there on the floor, Winston curled up at his feet, and revels in the quiet life, with no Jack demanding he come outside to read a scene. It's damn amazing.

After dinner, he gets to work tidying a few stacks of books, trying to determine what the hell the organization system was, but he gives up after only an hour. He can find no recognizable pattern at all, not by author names or by subject or by title or even, at last resort, by genre. So Will decides to leave it for another night and goes to lock up securely.

When he gets back, he finds Winston nosing around near the till area. He isn't eating anything, thank god, but Will still shoos him upstairs before he gets any ideas.

Will is just about to turn off the lights in the shop when he sees it: a strange set of five symbols set into the wood paneling next to the register. At first he thinks it might have been a bored teen employee passing the time minding the till, but once he passes his hand over it and wipes away most of the dust, he realizes that the symbols are set deep into the wood and pretty worn with age, as though dozens of hands have touched and rubbed the area over the years. The symbols are actually quite beautiful, in a strange ethereal way, and Will goes and fetches the cleaning supplies he had packed away because it doesn't seem right to leave this work of art covered up.

He scrubs the area until it gleams again, the symbols bright and stark against the wood, and traces them with a finger.

"I wonder what you stand for," Will muses to himself. "Someone spent a lot of time carving you. But hey, at least you're clean now. Maybe you'll bring me good luck. It'd be nice to have some good luck, for once."

He even imagines that the set of symbols light up, briefly, when he turns away. But it's probably just a trick of the light.

It takes another two weeks to turn the bookshop into a somewhat organized state, although Will finds that he relishes the labor. It's hard work, of course, but there is no blood, no demanding bosses, and no gossiping headlines. Will is free to wake up when he pleases (usually when Winston starts whining for food), to eat whatever he likes (he becomes very fond of the local pizza place, which can deliver in less than five minutes and also has some amazing fries), and to go to bed whenever he wants.

He also finds that adapting to life in a bookshop is strangely easy. Within a few days, he masters the art of weaving in amongst the book stacks. The old stove gives him trouble, at

first, but after he cleans up the store, it works like a charm. One time he even forgets to lock the back door, but no one breaks in, aside from a few bugs.

Even Winston settles in. He seems to understand that the books are not toys, and he certainly enjoys laying down in front of the heater Will buys for the apartment.

It's a good, quiet life, but Will knows that eventually he needs to actually socialize with other people, god forbid, because the FBI settlement money is not quite enough to retire on. So, after procrastinating for a while, he settles down with a brand new laptop and works on opening the store. It takes a few nights, and he develops a slight headache and a crick in neck, but eventually in between lots of coffee and breaks to play with Winston, he figures it out. He even traces over the symbols carved in the wood, for good luck.

"We'll be opening tomorrow," Will tells the store. "I hope you're ready."

The store doesn't answer, of course, but a warm breeze passes over him. It's probably just from the open door where he let Winston out to do his business, yet it still settles something deep within him. A sense of righteousness takes root in his bones, like he's finally started on a new path, away from the tangled, thorny FBI path that never quite suited him, and Will finds himself smiling without really knowing why.

"Yeah, I'm ready too," Will says, and pats the desk that has served him well through long hours organizing books, Googling on his laptop, and napping when he gets tired. "Thanks for the pep talk."

The first week, surprisingly, goes pretty well. Will doesn't get a lot of foot traffic, but once he props open the door and slaps a big *OPEN* sign in the window, customers start wandering in. Will gets treated to many a story about how the thought the store would never open, that the old owner was a right grouch, and aren't you a little young to be on your own. Fortunately, Winston makes for an adorable distraction, so Will gets through most of the conversations without his blood pressure rising too much.

The second week goes even better. Word of mouth has spread, his website hasn't crashed yet, and he even manages to clear out enough books to make a tiny reading corner at the front of the shop, complete with squishy chairs and a small table.

The third week, unfortunately, goes much less well. Mostly because one of his customers turns up dead.

"For the last time," Will says, struggling to remain calm, "I barely remember him. He came in, bought a book, complained about the price, and left. I don't even know his name; he paid in cash."

Jack gives him a skeptical look. Will's used to those, because Jack half the time never believed Will even when he paid Will to talk, but this is different; this is Jack suspecting Will of actually committing the crime instead of just failing to read the crime scene correctly, and it really, really gets Will's hackles up.

“So it’s just a coincidence, then,” Jack says, tone heavy with implication, “that it’s the first time the Ripper has dropped a body in, oh, ten years, and the last place the customer went was your shop? And you don’t have an alibi?”

“I live alone, Jack.”

“No security cameras?”

“It’s a bookshop. What the hell are people going to steal?”

“Books. You know, your very livelihood.”

“I don’t think you need to be concerned about my livelihood,” Will says through gritted teeth. *It’s your fault that I can’t teach for a livelihood anymore.*

“I do if it’s the place where a murder occurred.” Because Jack really is like a dog with a bone, and he will never let it go once he thinks he has it. Will used to admire him for that, because he got stuff done. It was great right up until he turned it on Will.

Will throws his hands up in exasperation. “You’ve searched the entire place by now! You know there isn’t any blood or evidence here. I don’t know what you want, Jack. I sold this guy one book and I don’t even remember what it was, and then he left and got killed, but it wasn’t me. I spent last time in bed with my dog and a nice drink. If that’s illegal, then arrest me now.”

The other agents, the ones who never knew Will and barely know Jack, give them both very alarmed looks. They’ve probably never seen anyone yell at Jack, and certainly Will never did, before he got arrested.

He never did a lot of things, before he got arrested.

Will stands up. “This interview is over,” he tells Jack, not letting the man interrupt. “If you need more information, you can contact me later. Possibly never. I’ll get a lawyer. Good day, Agent Crawford.”

The agents leave ten minutes later, with a stern warning for Will not to leave the state. Will slams the door behind them and closes for the day.

At least this time, when he goes upstairs to his home, he finds that the agents appear not to have made as huge of a mess as they did when they searched his original house. There’s papers scattered around and his to-read pile is completely messed up, but there’s a fresh pot of coffee on the stove and the blankets he had left in a haphazard pile at the end of the couch are now neatly folded. Will drinks that coffee, orders himself pizza, and passes out on the couch underneath the blankets.

A second body drops, and then a third. The second victim did visit Will’s bookshop, but on opening day, and seeing as she didn’t purchase anything and the security footage from the

café next door shows her going inside next, the FBI does not descend on him again. The third victim only walked by Will's bookshop, so Will isn't even notified about him.

At least, he isn't notified by the FBI.

He does, however, find a gaggle of reporters outside of his door, clamoring for information and shouting insinuations, so Will promptly decides that it's a good day to be closed. He locks the door, puts a chair under the knob for good measure, and then closes all the curtains.

He then goes upstairs to close those curtains, and that's when he finds a man standing in his kitchen.

"Uh," Will says, one foot inside the apartment and one foot still on the stairs.

The man turns around. He's wearing an immaculate if weirdly patterned suit, hair combed neatly back, an expensive looking watch on his wrist. He looks amazingly out of place in Will's dusty, tiny, slightly rundown apartment. Hell, he looks out of place for Will's rundown tiny bookshop.

"Hello, Will," the man says.

"Um. So. The store is closed?" Will rocks back on his heels and frowns. "Actually, how did you even get up here? The door is locked."

The man raises one eyebrow. That's all he does, and yet his entire face radiates disappointment in Will's intellectual ability. "This store is my home," he tells Will. "I cannot be locked out of it."

Will tries to calculate the distance between himself and the landline, and then realizes the man is standing right in the path of it and gives up. He leans on the doorframe, shifting his weight so that he can dodge behind the wall if the man charges or something, and says, "Well, I sort of bought the store? A while ago? So um. If you were the previous owner – "

"No. He's dead."

Will blinks. "And you know that how?"

The man tilts his head. "Why, I killed him, of course."

Will does not run screaming from the apartment, or grab his cellphone and dial 911, or just slam the door shut and hit his head a few times to make sure he isn't hallucinating. It's a near thing, to be truthful, but Winston chooses that moment to emerge from the bathroom. He perks up when he sees Will, and Will is just about to frantically gesture him over when Winston bounds forward and goes straight past the man in the suit.

Except. He doesn't go straight past. Not really.

More accurately, he goes straight *through* the man in the suit, who flickers like some futuristic hologram and looks down with a frown like he's mad about it.

“That was unpleasant,” the man muses. “Your dog, I assume?”

Will stares at him. “What the *hell* was that?” he demands.

The man is just opening his mouth to hopefully explain when there’s a small ding from the kitchen. Will has never heard such a sound before, but the man’s expression shifts immediately to satisfaction.

“Excellent,” he says cheerfully. “Just on time. I commend you for choosing to leave this oven in place, it really is a top quality piece. Please be seated; this will be a long story.”

The man, as it turns out, is named Hannibal. He is a forest spirit bound to the bookshop, because some carpenter decided to harvest wood from Hannibal’s forest ages ago and, when Hannibal and his kin showed up at his house pissed about the killing of their trees, the carpenter panicked and trapped them in the planks he had made. Hannibal can’t really give more details than that, because spirits measure time very different from humans and Hannibal actually spent a lot of time dozing, as it were, unless he was specifically called upon.

“And you just, what, would show up? And kill people?”

Hannibal shrugs gracefully. “This bookshop is my forest, now,” he explains. “The symbols changed my home, but they could not change my nature. My kind are meant to protect our homes. By any means necessary.”

“Means including *murder*?”

“I didn’t murder them here.”

“But you – wait,” Will says, because the plural pronoun registers after the fact. He sets down his sandwich, which he had actually been enjoying, and leans forward. “What do you mean, them? I thought you said you had just killed the old owner.”

Nothing changes in Hannibal’s face or demeanor. He doesn’t even twitch. But he does *something*, because Winston actually sits up and looks in his direction when previously Winston had cared not a little bit about the murderous magical forest spirit in their apartment. It does not comfort Will in the slightest.

“Hannibal,” Will growls.

“Those people were rude,” Hannibal says primly, which is how Will finds out that Hannibal has not only killed the previous owner, but the three victims the FBI is going crazy about.

And he also cleaned Will’s bathroom (why), reorganized his closet (seriously why), and put his laundry in the washer (hell no). Because he thinks Will doesn’t take care of himself. And also because murdering people gives him more power or something.

Which is where Will hits his limit for the day. He holds up a hand, cutting off Hannibal’s probably-fascinating-under-any-other-circumstances lecture on the nature of sacrifice and blood and magic, and stands up. Winston long ago wandered off to curl up on his favorite rug

by the window and he already ate dinner, so Will is more concerned with getting horizontal and praying that he wakes up to find this is a particularly vivid and strange dream.

“I’m going to bed,” Will snaps, when Hannibal follows him like a duckling. “I can handle that myself.”

“But I haven’t changed the sheets on – ”

“Yeah, and you’re not going to,” Will says, and slams the door shut in his face.

Unfortunately, this is how he learns that forest spirits can just *walk through doors*.

Fortunately, once Will gets on the bed and pointedly pretends to fall asleep, Hannibal heaves a great sigh and drifts away, muttering something that Will really, really hopes he misread, because the last thing he needs is Hannibal to start a fire in his kitchen while trying to make . . . whatever the dish he mentioned was.

Hannibal is still there, in the morning. Will stumbles into the kitchen and makes a beeline for the coffeemaker only to find that it’s already full and a cup is waiting on the counter. Hannibal is at the stove, making something that smells a lot like bacon.

Will squints. “I didn’t know I had bacon.”

“You didn’t.”

Will swallows his coffee. Takes another sip. Swallows again. “Do I want to know how you acquired this bacon?”

“You seemed disinterested in my explanation last night.”

Hannibal, damn him, actually sounds like he’s sulking about it. Will gapes at him, because he doesn’t know how to explain that he’s not disinterested so much as extremely, extremely out of his depth. Finally, he settles for saying, “I was really tired, and your lecture sounded like it needed a lot of brainpower.”

“It was not a lecture.”

“You asked me to picture a physics diagram. That’s a lecture. I was a teacher, I should know.”

The mention of teaching seems to be a sufficient distraction for Hannibal, because he straightens up and the sulking aspect vanishes from his demeanor. “A teacher? What was your educational specialty, if I may ask?”

Will stabs a piece of bacon. “How to catch serial killers,” he answers, and grins up at Hannibal.

Hannibal doesn’t laugh, but he does smile widely enough to show off surprisingly sharp canines for a forest spirit, and that’s good enough for Will.

After that, Hannibal just . . . doesn't leave. Will's still not really sure where he's getting the food he's cooking, but Will's also never eaten so well in his life, so he decides against poking that hornet's nest. He also doesn't stop Hannibal from fretting over the aesthetics of his shop and reorganizing the books, even if he does sometimes curse because Hannibal has moved an entire genre and he has to go hunting for it the next day. He does, however, draw the line at Hannibal doing his laundry, because there are some things a man needs to do for himself.

"You humans are so strange," Hannibal says, frowning down at him as Will hastily shoves clothes back in his dresser. "Why does it matter if I am handling your underclothes? Also, that shirt should probably be retired. Preferably to the trash."

"Look, just because you can change your appearance whenever you want doesn't mean we all can," Will replies. "I like my old clothes. They're comfortable. And I don't need to waste money on new ones."

"You've never objected to my appearance before. Should I change it?"

"No thanks," Will says quickly, because Hannibal changed into some kind of flowy robes when he first was demonstrating his abilities and Will really, really does not need to see that much skin ever again. "Just, you know. I'm human. Limited to changing clothes the, uh, non-magical way. So I'll keep mine, thanks."

"You are very strange," Hannibal complains, and then wanders off to go make dinner.

Hannibal does not decide to grace the bookshop with his presence when customers are actually present, which Will thanks his lucky stars for. Will does offer, because his ma didn't teach him good manners for nothing, but Hannibal wrinkles his nose and politely declines. He does, however, still apparently spy on Will somehow, because another customer drops dead. This time it's determined to be due to an old-fashioned, not suspicious at all heart attack, but Will doesn't believe it because he remembers, vividly, how Hannibal demonstrated that he could pass easily through walls and flesh if he wanted.

Also, Will remembers that the man insulted him and called the bookshop rude names.

"Hannibal, you cannot just – just murder everyone who's rude!"

"Why not?" Hannibal says, as absently as though they're discussing whether to have chocolate sauce or caramel sauce for dinner. "Rudeness matters."

"*I'm* rude," Will points out. "I don't wash the dishes, I never say good morning, and I certainly hog all the blankets."

"You have shown me great hospitality, actually. You have welcomed me into your home, you have taken steps to see to my comfort, and you have been most effusive with your praise for my cooking. You are perhaps the most polite person I have met." Hannibal pauses. "After you have had your coffee."

"That sounds more accurate. And stop murdering my customers!"

“It’s part of my nature.”

“Well, at least space them out more, for crying out loud.”

“And why should I do that?”

Will throws down his trump card, because it only took him a few days to realize that Hannibal doesn’t annoy him all the damn time solely because he’s personally insulted by Will’s wardrobe and eating schedule. “Because if I get arrested for the killings, I’ll go to jail, and you can’t leave the bookshop so then you’ll be alone again.”

Hannibal heaves a very aggrieved sigh at that and he doesn’t actually reply to Will, but the killings stop. The FBI agent who has been tailing Will finally goes away after two weeks, and Will breathes a sigh of relief. To celebrate, Will goes and buys himself a cake, resplendent with chocolate and sugar icing. Hannibal doesn’t need to eat, but Will’s long learned that he has a sweet tooth, a throwback to the days when people would leave the spirits offerings of cream and bread. He even buys a dog-friendly one for Winston so that they can all enjoy dessert.

Hannibal’s eyes go gratifying large when he sees the cake, and he only politely protests once before he accepts the plate and the hefty slice Will cuts for him. They are just about to dig in when the phone rings.

“Seriously?” Will says when Hannibal makes to get up. “It’s after hours. And we’re about to eat dessert.”

“Not answering would be rude, Will,” Hannibal chides.

Will sighs and digs in anyways. Hannibal does insist on some ceremony in their meals, which mostly consists of him elegantly arranging the courses and explaining each dish in detail, but there’s no elegant way to stuff one’s face full of cake in anticipation of a food coma, so Will doesn’t bother waiting for Hannibal to come back. Plus, this is a store bought cake, and while Will wouldn’t put it past Hannibal to try and decipher the ingredients, he’d rather just enjoy it as is for the terribly unhealthy food that it is.

Unfortunately, he’s gotten no more than three bites in before Hannibal appears. He has the strangest expression Will’s ever seen on Hannibal, which is saying a lot. If Will had to describe it, he would say Hannibal is being . . . careful.

“What?” Will asks around a mouthful of cake.

“Will,” Hannibal says pointedly.

Will shrugs and loads up his fork again. Then he swallows when Hannibal’s expression gets more severe, like someone’s died, and he repeats, “What?”

“Someone is on the phone. For you,” Hannibal clarifies. He tilts his head. “She said her name was Alana.”

Will promptly swears.

“Will, language.”

Alana comes into the shop with a smile and smelling of flowers. She doesn’t hesitate to hug Will, even though he definitely hesitates to hug her back. Fortunately, Winston has no such compunctions, and he bounds right up to happily lick her and receive pats on the head.

“You look . . . well,” Will says awkwardly, once they’ve parted.

“You too,” Alana replies, and hers is far more genuine. She pets Winston’s ears and looks about the bookshop, eyes bright with interest. “I almost didn’t believe it when Jack told me you’d taken over a bookshop. I didn’t peg you for the guy who wanted to be surrounded by books.”

Will shrugs. “Well, books don’t talk back. Or submit misspelled essays.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that.”

They chat lightly, after that. The weather, Alana’s classes, the substitutes they’re cycling to fill Will’s position. Applesauce, the dog Alana claimed to just be fostering when she had Winston but now has all but adopted. Beverly, when she filled the entire men’s bathroom with balloons because Price and Zeller annoyed her. It feels strange, acknowledging the old part of Will’s life, but he’s actually enjoying it until Alana gets to the point of her visit.

“So, when are you coming back to teach?”

Will blinks. “I’m not? I turned in my resignation, Alana. Even cleared out my office.”

“I mean, you deserved a vacation,” Alana allows. “Especially after. Well. You know. But teaching made you happy, Will. You said it was a good compromise for not being in the field.”

“We both know I wouldn’t last more than a week if I was teaching before Jack would drag me back,” Will says sharply.

Alana winces, because she can’t deny it. Jack is tenacious and pushy and determined, and Will knows himself all too well; he knows eventually, Jack would come to him with a body count and Will would tag alone “just for one time” and then they’d be right back where they were, Will with his nightmares and Jack with his suspicions.

“But are you really happy?” Alana questions. “Here? Alone? Isolation isn’t a good thing, Will.”

“I’m not alone. I have Winston. And Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s name just slips out; Will doesn’t mean to say it. But Alana jumps on it right away, because that is just Will’s luck.

“Hannibal? Is the one who answered the phone?” Without even waiting for an answer, she continues, “Is he your roommate?”

He's a magical forest spirit who was captured and bound to this bookshop. I found out when he murdered several of my customers. He hates messes and loves sugar and milk. Also he wears increasingly absurd plaid suits and keeps trying to get me to wear a suit as well.
"Yes," Will says lamely, because he has no other way to answer.

"Oh. That's . . . nice."

Alana's tone very much says that it is not nice, probably mostly because she's seen Will as a sweaty, sleepwalking mess during the worst of it and she probably thinks that Hannibal is being unfairly subjected to the tragedy that is Will. That, or she's surprised to find that Will, as a grown man, is still living with a roommate like a broke college kid. Either way, Will bristles at the judgment in her tone.

"He helps keep the place clean and we watch movies together," Will says. "He's very nice."

"Does he know . . . about . . . you know. "

Will rolls his eyes. "It was all over the news, Alana. Even my next door neighbor asked me about it." *Also after I had nightmares about it, Hannibal sat me down and covered me in blankets and coaxed the whole story out of me. I had to talk him out of murdering a lot more people. It was strangely therapeutic.*

"And what did you tell her?"

"That I was the guy who didn't kill all those people."

"Is that what you told Hannibal?"

"No, he got more of the story out of me after the FBI came sniffing."

"Funny that you mention the FBI," Alana says lightly. "Jack never mentioned that anyone else was in residence here."

Will's heart rate goes through the roof. The world blurs a little bit. Winston even whines when Will's fist clenches in his fur. But Will can't help it. How could he have forgotten that the FBI combed every section of the bookshop and the apartment up above? Jack probably even pulled the records of the sale, and they will definitely show that Will is the sole owner and resident of this address, and Hannibal doesn't even legally exist –

But then Alana goes in a completely different direction. "Are you in a relationship with him?"

Will says, "What."

"You seem to have gotten yourself together," Alana says, waving a hand at the bookshop. "You've got a – a new house, a new job. A new life. A stable life. Is Hannibal – is he part of it?"

"Why does it matter to you?" Will says sharply.

“It shouldn’t.”

“Damn right, it shouldn’t,” Will snaps. He pushes himself to his feet. Even back when his brain was melting out of his skull, he was still a legal and full grown adult, and he hadn’t liked it when Alana or anyone else had cast judgment on his life. He finds that he likes it even less now that he’s experienced what it’s like not to be at the beck and call of the FBI and to have a friend who accepts Will just as he is. Hannibal does nag him for his eating and hygiene and the state of his apartment, but he doesn’t try to *change* him; he just tries to meet Will where he is, and explore what he can be. And honestly, he’s mostly accepted that Will is the way he is, and their back and forth has settled into a casual kind of ritual. An affirmation of friendship.

“Will, I – I just. I’m sorry.”

“I think you should leave,” Will tells her.

“No, Will, I. I just wanted to see. If it was too late.”

“For what?”

And then Alana squares her shoulders and stands up and marches forward. At first, Will thinks she is going to push past him and leave the bookshop, but instead she swivels and leans forward and *kisses* him.

It’s a good kiss. A great kiss. A kiss Will-of-last-year had dreamed about so many times.

But even now, Will can feel Alana analyzing, examining, thinking. He’s always admired her for that. He’d even thought that their methods of analysis might make them a formidable team, professionally or perhaps intimately. But now he sees that puzzle pieces don’t quite line up, because Will’s curiosity about crimes scenes dried up when he got put in jail and Alana, well. She’s still consulting with Jack, if she knows about the search on his house.

He steps back. “Alana,” he says softly.

“Will.”

“I’ve dreamed about that,” he confesses, because he owes her the truth.

She half-smiles. “Me too. I thought, perhaps, if you found your place, if you were . . . stable. Maybe.”

“But you can’t stop thinking.”

“No,” she sighs, and pushes her hair away from her face. “I have a . . . professional curiosity about you. But I thought . . . I thought I could try.”

Will shrugs helplessly. He’s heard worse from people flirting or trying to kiss him. And maybe if he was alone and sad and isolated, he might have even taken her up on it, because Alana is beautiful and wonderful and kind.

But Hannibal is upstairs – Hannibal with his funny name, and complex expressions, and weird goddamn tangents – and all Will wants right now is to go back upstairs and eat cake with him.

“I don’t think . . . that we’d be good. For either of us.”

Alana purses her lips, but she doesn’t deny it. It doesn’t sting at all, which is how Will realizes he’s let go of his crush on her altogether. Perhaps he’s known for a while, ever since the day he woke up and his first thought was *Hannibal* and not *Alana*.

“I think I’m going to go ahead and leave now,” Alana says quietly.

Will musters a small smile. “End of the house call?”

“You’re not my patient.”

“No, I’m not.” Will holds out his hand. “Friends?”

“Friends,” Alana affirms, and shakes it. A real smile crosses her face, and it’s completely cliché, like they’ve become closer friends by realizing they are not meant to be dating.

Then again, Will has a magical forest spirit living in his apartment who likes to cook and murder rude customers, so maybe he can’t comment on cliché.

“Good night, Alana.”

“Good night, Will. Don’t be a stranger. I know you have my number.”

And just like that, she sweeps out the door, as elegant as when she first entered. Will’s heart still thuds a little, to watch her walk away, because for so long she’d been the pedestal he’d aimed his life for. To have someone so smart and beautiful interested in him? It would have been amazing. But it also would have been *normal*, and Will is anything but normal. He fled the FBI to open a bookshop, after all, instead of going to beg for his old job back and be dragged along to increasingly darker crime scenes.

So Will closes the door, locks it, and heads back upstairs to his new normal, which includes a chocolate cake, a sleepy dog, and Hannibal.

“I kissed Alana,” Will announces when he pushes through the door, because he can practically see Hannibal vibrating in his chair with the need to pepper him with questions.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Hannibal make a face from where he’s stirring something on the stove. The air smells laden with mint and caramel, so clearly Hannibal’s occupied himself with cooking instead of just eating the cake in Will’s absence. It’s just so Hannibal that Will finds himself smiling as he throws himself back onto the couch.

“What was her reaction?” Hannibal asks, voice completely steady.

Will cranes his head to look at Hannibal, who is pointedly not looking at Will, even though like 90% of the time Hannibal isn't looking anywhere else during their conversations. "Seriously? That's your first question?"

"It's a valid one."

"If you're telling me that you weren't spying on us, then I'll call you a liar."

Hannibal heaves a sigh. "I'm aware of everything that happens in this bookshop. It's my forest," he reminds Will.

"So, then you already know Alana's reaction."

"I do."

"So what's the real question you're wanting to ask? And before you deny it, I'm pretty sure that thing you're stirring is done and you're just burning excess energy now. So you definitely have a question."

Hannibal sets the pot down with a thump. "I'm wondering why you felt compelled to come upstairs and tell me about the kiss. Given that you're aware that I am aware of what happened."

Will shrugs. "I've wanted to kiss her for a long time. Basically since I met her."

"Have you now," Hannibal says flatly.

"Is that a problem?"

"*Yes*," Hannibal snarls, and he's suddenly just in front of Will. His form is flickering and glowing, eyes alight with agitation, and Will is suddenly very aware that Hannibal is not at all human. Hannibal is also much, much stronger, which he demonstrates when he fists his hands into Will's shirt and hauls him to his feet to slam him against the nearest wall.

As if from far away, Will hears the distinct sound of something falling to the floor and breaking, but he doesn't give a damn about it, because Hannibal is –

Hannibal is *kissing* him.

It's possessive and overwhelming and hot, and Will finds himself pushing back, grappling to wind his fingers in Hannibal's clothes and pull him even closer. It's not normal or safe, like it was with Alana; it's passion and fire and *danger*. It's the instant bolt of lust he'd felt when he'd seen Hannibal half-naked in flowy robes and the comfortable companionship of curling up on the couch to trade stories and eat Hannibal's fantastic meals. It's the best kiss Will's ever had, and from Hannibal's enthusiastic response, perhaps not just for him.

When they finally need to part for air, Hannibal doesn't go far. He lets his hands drift to Will's waist, but his face remains close, nuzzling into Will's hair like some kind of wild predatory cat trying to scent mark his territory.

“What was that?” Will asks, still a bit dazed.

“A clutch for balance,” Hannibal says, voice crackling with power. “A compromise.”

“For what?”

Hannibal laughs darkly. “For not going into the street and rending Alana into a thousand tiny pieces for touching what is *mine”*

“Possessive, much?”

Hannibal leans forward deliberately, so that they are pressed together from chest to thigh, and Will swallows hard because, wow. Apparently forest spirits are relatively similar to humans in more ways than just how their faces appear.

“You like it,” Hannibal purrs. “And you know deep inside that you are mine. You have made your home in my forest, and you have brought me offerings of cream and bread, and you have eaten my food at my table. Until the last tree falls and the last star burns out, *you are mine*.”

“Huh,” Will says, because it’s about all he can manage. “Does uh. Does that include sex?”

Hannibal gives him a disdainful look. “If you would have let me change the bedsheets the day we met, I would have had you on the bed right then and there.”

“Well, let’s not dawdle any longer – hey!”

Epilogue

“Thank you for coming, did you find everything you wanted?” Will says automatically when the next customer puts a stack of books down on the desk. He’s found that most of the rituals of being a bookshop owner are now practically ingrained in him, down to the fake customer service voice and the fake customer service smile.

The lady huffs. “No,” she says haughtily. “I came to find a nice book for my son’s birthday, but your stock is abysmally small.”

Will raises an eyebrow as he begins scanning the books. “Did you have a specific book in mind? The teen section is quite large; half of the left side, actually. We just had a shipment.”

“I checked the section. The entire section. It’s all full of nonsense books with daydreams. I want realistic and useful information.”

“How old is your son?”

“Old enough that he deserves good literature.”

Will sighs. “Well, that’s your prerogative. You could always try Amazon.”

“For a birthday gift??? Absolutely not!”

“This is a small store,” Will reminds her, ringing up the last book. “What we have is what we have. I’m sorry that it wasn’t to your liking. Your total is – ”

“Your organization also leaves much to be desired,” the lady interrupts tartly. “Why on earth are the self-improvement books next to the romance books? And your reading area really is quite small and very cluttered. And . . .”

The lady drones on and on about the terrible, awful tragedy of the many, many shortcomings of Will’s bookshop the entire time that she hands over money and Will hands her change. Will just barely manages not to roll his eyes, but he can’t help himself from tracing the circles engraved in the desk as he waits for her to finally finish and flounce out. It’s a comforting habit now; Will could redraw the exact configuration deaf, blind, and half-sleep.

Plus, Hannibal really likes it when Will summons him.

An arm slips around his waist just as a kiss is pressed to his forehead. “Hello, Will,” Hannibal says, appearing from the dark back office like the magical spirit he is. “Good day, madam.”

The lady gapes at them. For a second, Will thinks she might have seen the gleam of magic as Hannibal slid through the walls – he still hates using doors – but then she hisses, “That is very improper behavior in public! Think of the children! You’re exposing them to – to that!”

And just like that, Will is done with her. “Yes, how terrible, a man with his husband. Truly shocking, that marriage exists,” he says dryly.

The lady sputters and grabs for her books, probably to flee and then never return.

Will, however, leans down slightly to pluck a bookmark from the shelves underneath the register. He handmade them all himself, from wood salvaged from one of the bookshelves that they had had to remove because it was literally falling apart. Hannibal had been very fussy about the dust and the shavings, but he’d gone quiet when he’d seen what Will had carved into them. At the top was the standard logo for the shop – a regular book, with white paper pages and black charcoal ink – but at the bottom, well. At the bottom are a very specifically chosen set of symbols.

Will tells anyone who asks that they’re just fun doodles. So far, no one’s caught on.

“Sorry this experience wasn’t up to your standards,” Will says politely. “Would you like a complementary bookmark? Handmade, of course.”

The lady hesitates, clearly reluctant, but eventually her greed wins out and she snatches it from his hand. Then she finally does flounce out, chin head high and arms full of books, and slams the door behind her.

Hannibal rumbles. “That was very rude of her.”

“Yes, it was.” Will leans up and presses a kiss to Hannibal’s cheek, because he knows that gleam in Hannibal’s eyes. “Happy hunting, husband. Be back by dinner, okay?”

“Your wish is my command,” Hannibal says with a little bow.

And Will whistles a little tune and turns to the next customer, a teenager with a bright smile and book clasped lovingly in her arms. “Thanks for coming, did you find everything you wanted?”

FINIS

End Notes

A/N: And Will and Hannibal live happily ever after in their magical bookshop. Whenever a customer is rude, Will gives them a bookmark and Hannibal follows the "twig" of his forest to the customer's house and murders them. Then he comes home and makes Will dinner. Will buys Hannibal cakes and Hannibal sometimes brings back puppies. They become known as That Couple who own the bookshop together.

I hope you enjoyed this! I must confess that I intended this to be like 6900 words and then, um, things happened. As you can see :)

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